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Dance

Edited by Gia Kourlas • dance@timeoutny.com

Underland sound

Stephen Petronio digs deep into Nick Cave. By **Gia Kourlas**

Stephen Petronio lives for *petit allegro*. As he succinctly put it in a recent interview, “Hummingbirds are my favorite birds.” In his high-voltage choreography, small jumps send bare feet skimming across the floor as the torso unfurls like a ribbon. Petronio and his company return to the Joyce on Tuesday 5 in *Underland*, a New York premiere that was originally created for the Sydney Dance Company. The work, featuring costumes by Tara Subkoff and visual design by Ken Tabachnick and Mike Daly, takes place in a dark, dank world—in other words, the perfect setting for the music of Nick Cave, who also happens to be Australian. Throughout his long career, Petronio has worked with many musical artists—Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, Rufus Wainwright and Nico Muhly among them—but for him, Cave is different. “The whole piece is really an homage to Nick’s talent,” Petronio says. “His voice gives me chills.”

Had you worked with Nick Cave’s music before?

No. The company had been talking to me for a couple of years about coming to do something. [Then—artistic director] Graeme Murphy was the single voice of the company, and he knew he wanted to take a break; I think he just got very tired all of a sudden, and so they called me with two months’ notice: “What will you do?” and I blurted out, “Get me Nick Cave, and I’ll do whatever you want.”

You talked about how your attention span is short. How do you rein it in? Or do you make that energy work for you?

I like having two or three things to do at one time. First, let me say that my art-making is a practice, so however I am when I’m sitting down talking to you, my life changes drastically when I go into the studio. It’s not the chatty Stephen; I find that choreographing is a meditation, and I go into a different state. The minute I start sweating, everything changes. My body’s always been that way, and I really think my movement comes from that meditative state. Everything else falls away. But I like to have two or three things on the burner at the same time. Sometimes I can work on one microsecond for two or three hours, which freaks the dancers out; if I have two or three projects going, I can turn my attention to another problem. Often when I do that, the first one solves itself—in a *second*.

How much is what you make based on what it looks like versus what it feels like?

It always starts by what it feels like, because I don’t look in the mirror. I’m very lucky that I started as an improviser and the mirror was my enemy. Even now, when I’m choreographing, I’ll sometimes get in front of a window where I can see a very small shadow

of myself, so I’ll get an idea of shape without actually having to look at myself. I’ve made some of my best work that way. In this piece, there’s a solo for Amanda Wells.

I am in love with that solo! I was going to ask who was dancing it.

I made that in Graeme’s office before lunch every day. He had a TV up on a stand, so I could just see my upper body in the TV. I would run downstairs after lunch before I forgot it and teach it. I actually taught that to the whole company and one woman emerged as the diva.

After *Underland* was a huge success, Murphy announced he was leaving the company. I remember hearing that you wanted his job. Is that true?

Yes. I made a very hard pitch for that job. For me, it was a dream come true. The company adored me.

The piece kind of revitalized the company. And I feel like America is just like, “Oh, Stephen Petronio? We

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know him. Get in line.” I was like the king of Sydney. My face was on the front page of the paper—often. And not that I need that, but that’s the position of dance in that culture. It was down to two people, me and the woman they chose—Tanja Liedtke. They asked me if I would share it with her, and I said no.

God.

And the end of the story is tragic: Two weeks before she started, she was killed. A truck hit her. It was so weird; I just felt lucky that I didn’t get the job in that moment. It was not meant to be. Instead of becoming bitchy and bitter, I decided to expand my company: That’s why it’s grown from six to eight to ten to 12. I had to put together a three-year-plan for Sydney Dance Company, and it taught me that I have the plan, I have the vision, I just need to turn it around here.

Do you have a rehearsal space?

No. But you never know why things are the way they are. It turns out that my not having a space is part of why I’ve survived. The Mellon Foundation analyzed my company, and it turns out that my longevity is directly proportionate to my low overhead. I kind of got good at making it look like there was a lot more money around me. [Laughs]

And you don’t talk about working in an impoverished field. Is that on purpose?

Absolutely on purpose. There’s a whole poverty mentality in dance. I think dance is glamorous, and I love the glamour of dance. It’s also sweaty and gritty and sensible shoes and all that crap, but it’s fabulous and full of gold and diamonds, and part of my mission is to bring that fantasy to life. It’s not poor movement. My work is rich.

Stephen Petronio Company is at the Joyce Tue 5–Apr 10.



SOLO TURN Amanda Wells takes flight.

Dance

UNDERLAND PLAYLIST ▶ Mah Sanctum ▶ Wild World ▶ The Camey ▶ The Weeping Song ▶ The Ship Song ▶ Stagger Lee ▶ The Mercy Seat ▶ Death Is Not the End